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ABSTRACT

The Children-at-Risk program (CAR), a drug and delinquency prevention program, targets high-risk adolescents aged 11 to 13 who live in distressed neighborhoods. The program features integrated delivery of comprehensive services that are tailored to the community and involve close collaboration with other services providers. The Urban Institute is conducting an outcome evaluation of the program's impact on school performance, family functioning, delinquent behavior, and substance abuse. The CAR program focuses on small, high-risk geographic areas. Case management of the entire family is the heart of the program, with each family having a case manager to assess needs and supply each family member with appropriate services. The education component is critical. The full evaluation will examine CAR programs in five cities. These preliminary results are for 228 youths from the following cities: (1) Austin (Texas); (2) Bridgeport (Connecticut); (3) Memphis (Tennessee); and (4) Seattle (Washington). Results from these cities indicate that youth in the CAR program had fewer contacts with police and the courts and had higher rates of school attendance and promotion than control groups. There was also evidence of declines in neighborhood crime in CAR neighborhoods in three of the four cities. (SLD)

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Intervening with High-Risk Youth. Preliminary Findings from the Children-at-Risk Program.

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Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

April 1996

Intervening with High-Risk Youth

Preliminary Findings from the Children-at-Risk Program

Summary of a Presentation by Adele Harrell, Ph.D., The Urban Institute

The Children-at-Risk (CAR) program, a drug and delinquency prevention program, targets high-risk adolescents ages 11 to 13 who live in distressed neighborhoods. The program features integrated delivery of comprehensive services that are tailored to the community and involve close collaboration among the police, schools, case managers, and other youth service providers. Originally implemented in 1992 as a 3-year experimental demonstration program, it is funded by numerous private foundations and the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ).

Under NIJ sponsorship, the Urban Institute is conducting an outcome evaluation of the program's impact on school performance, family functioning, delinquent behavior, and substance abuse. Preliminary results based on the first year of program operation in the first four cities to begin CAR programs indicate that:

- Youths in the CAR program had fewer contacts with police and courts than the control group and had higher rates of school attendance and promotion to the next grade level.
- There was evidence of greater declines in neighborhood crime in CAR neighborhoods in three of the four cities.

The CAR approach to drug and delinquency prevention

The CAR approach to prevention builds on the integration of two established criminology theories: First, the social control approach maintains that delinquency and problem behaviors occur when youths fail to acquire the norms and values of mainstream society; the second argues that youths resort to illegal activities because they cannot attain their goals through legal means.

Selection criteria. The CAR program focuses on small, high-risk geographic areas with a comprehensive approach that is designed to meet needs at the individual, family, peer-group, and neighborhood levels.

Youths are selected for the program based on the following criteria:

- Ages 11 to 13 years—a critical developmental stage of increasing peer involvement.
- Enrollment at the neighborhood school and living in the target neighborhood.
- Meeting one of the following risk criteria: a family risk, such as a history of family violence or of child abuse and neglect, a family member convicted of a crime, gang membership, or suspected drug use; a school risk, which includes not only an academic problem but also a behavioral problem; and a personal risk, such as drug abuse, past arrest, gang membership, or teen pregnancy.

Program services. Case management of the entire family is the heart of the program, with each family having a case manager to assess needs and to supply each family member with appropriate services. Approximately half of these youths have also been recommended for mentoring, but the high rate of broken appointments has been a problem. In one site, a mentoring preparation program was established to teach the youths how to keep appointments and to instruct mentors about types of activities to do with the youths.

The education component is also critical in order to prepare children to succeed. Most of the youths are far behind grade level and need interesting activities and incentives to motivate them. Afterschool tutoring has not been as well attended as an afterschool computer lab. To create incentives to improve academic achievement in

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Austin, Texas, Big Brothers/Big Sisters is giving the youths certificates guaranteeing them $2,000 towards a college education if they complete high school. Summer programs stress work experience and provide stipends for youths performing jobs and attending employment training.

Local police are also very active in the CAR program and organize activities in the neighborhoods. The closest police collaboration exists in the Bridgeport, Connecticut, program where police officers and case managers share a storefront office accessible to the youths.

The final element of the program is services integration. Agencies work together at two levels. Policy boards meet to resolve issues among agencies; case managers discuss the child with members from each agency to determine what services are needed.

Preliminary evaluation findings

Study method. The full evaluation includes CAR programs in high-risk neighborhoods in five cities: Austin, Texas; Bridgeport, Connecticut; Memphis, Tennessee; Savannah, Georgia; and Seattle, Washington. In the target neighborhoods, half of the eligible youths (338) were randomly selected to participate in the program. The remainder (333) became the control group. Comparison neighborhoods, similar in poverty rates, crime, and drug problems, were selected in the same cities and 203 high-risk youths in these neighborhoods were chosen to serve as a quasi-experimental comparison group. Comparisons of the treatment and control groups within the target neighborhoods will assess the impact of intensive case management, family services, mentoring, and education incentives. The quasi-experimental comparisons in each city will be used to look at the effects of neighborhood intervention. Evaluation data will include interviews with the youths and caregivers that were conducted before the start of services and 2 years later, at the end of services, as well as records provided by police, courts, and schools.

Analyses are under way. The following preliminary findings were based on a sample from the first year of the program, which included 228 youths from the first four cities to begin CAR programs (excluding Savannah, which began in the fall of 1993).

Individual comparisons

In comparison to the control group, CAR participants had:

- Almost half the number of contacts with the police (41 compared to 69 for the control group) although prior to implementation of CAR, the two groups had similar numbers.
- Less than half the number of contacts with the juvenile court compared to the control group (34 compared to 71). Data included both police cases and cases sent directly to courts (e.g., schools referring directly for truancy).
- A greater percentage of youths being promoted to the next higher grade (88 percent compared to 72 percent) and indications of lower rates of chronic absenteeism.

The CAR youths did not, however, have higher grades or higher scores on standardized tests. As noted earlier, it has been difficult to motivate youths to attend afterschool tutoring partly because of the problems of traveling home in dangerous neighborhoods.

Neighborhood comparisons

Findings were collected from the four cities that had quasi-experimental comparison neighborhoods and included the percentage change in Part 1 crimes from 1991 to 1993. The CAR neighborhoods showed that the decline in Part 1 offenses in three of the four cities exceeded the decline in the comparison neighborhoods and exceeded declines citywide. The only exception was Memphis, perhaps due to considerable turnover in the police department during this period. For Part 2 offenses, there was also a differential improvement in the CAR neighborhoods, again, except for Memphis.

Future analyses

An analysis of the costs of the program is planned, which will include comparing both direct costs with the monetary value of benefits that might result from the program's ability to prevent crime and drug abuse. This is an important first step in identifying break-even points in the program—the level of success that CAR needs to achieve to pay for itself. Other areas include examining differences in risk factors for violence in comparison to risk factors for drug abuse and differences in the effect of the program on males and females.

The evaluation is being conducted under NIJ grant 92–OD–CX–0031 by Adele Harrell, Ph.D., Director, Program on Law and Behavior, The Urban Institute. For further information on the project, please contact Rosemary Murphy, Program Manager, Office of Research and Evaluation, NIJ, at 202–307–2959.

As part of NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series, Dr. Harrell discussed this study with an audience of researchers and criminal justice professionals and practitioners. A 60-minute VHS videotape of this and the other presentations in the series is available for $19 including postage and handling ($24 in Canada and other countries). Please ask for NCJ 153270.

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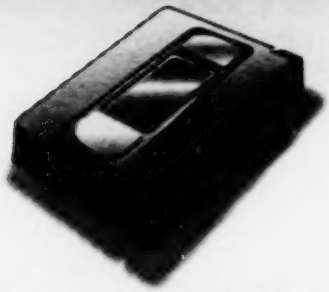

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